DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 109 PS 020 754

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TITLE Off to a Good Start. Ways of Working with Parents Pre and Post School Entry.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (20th, Flagstaff, AZ, August 2-7, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent School Relationship; *Preschool Children; *School Entrance Age; *Student Adjustment; *Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS *England

ABSTRACT

Noting the importance of procedures for welcoming and admitting children younger than 5 years of age into English Infant schools, this paper presents the results of a survey which compared the ways three schools work with parents before and after children's school entry. Personnel from the three schools were asked questions concerning the nature of contact between school and parents, areas of parental concern, and difficulties encountered with parents. Results indicated that most parents: (1) found the informal initial contact acceptable; (2) asked the same questions regarding starting date, uniforms, and beginning reading; (3) liked the short discussion and information session linked with an informal social visit; (4) did not receive home visits from school representatives; and (5) were invited to schools in a variety of ways, after their children had enrolled, to discuss curriculum and child progress. Overall, parents appeared to have good opportunities for visiting schools and for acquiring information in a welcoming environment. The schools recognized that parental cooperation, understanding, and interest were essential for a satisfactory transition of children from home to school; and that devoting time to contact with parents was a crucial factor in promoting good relationships between parents and schools. (HTH)

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OFF TO A GOOD START.

WAYS OF WORKING WITH PARENTS PRE AND POST SCHOOL ENTRY.

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Prerented at the 20th OMEP World Congress
Arizona 1992.

OFF TO A GOOD START.

WAYS OF WORKING WITH PARENTS PRE AND POST SCHOOL ENTRY.

'Départ Lancé' Une methode de travailler avec les parents avant et apres l'initiation de leurs enfants a l'école maternelle.

'Entrar con buen pie en la educacion primario'.
Un metodo de tradajar con padres antes y despnes de la inscripcion de sus ninos en la escuela primera.

This paper looks at the ways in which three schools deal with issues arising from the need for parental involvement pre and post school entry.

Background

In the United Kingdom, children must attend full time education the term after their fifth birthday. Schools, therefore, usually took in children aged between 5 and 5 1/2 years.Children had a reasonable background of socialisation and other learning experiences before starting school.

At that time, schools received funding for books and equipment and were staffed and funded on the number of children of statutory age in school. Some schools with adequate staffing and space admitted children in the term of their fifth birthday as 'rising fives', although no additional funding was available for these children.
The amount of schooling each child received therefore depended on its date of birth as the English educational year is from September to August.
At that time, the introduction of the child and the involvement of parents was seen by some schools as important in terms of what was required of the child on entry.

To rectify the shorter length of schooling received by summer born children of only 6 terms in the Infant School,approval was given in December 1989 for the admittance of children below the statutory age so that all children could have at least 8 terms as infants.

Schools in the United Kingdom are now in charge of their own expenditure, called Local Management of Schools (LM) and a sum of money is given to each school based on the numbers and ages of children on roll. To fund the younger children, the individual pupil allocation was increased to 1.3 of the basic sum per child.This made the intake of younger children financially attractive although extra money for staffing was not provided as such.
Schools therefore, found it possible , financially, to take in younger children.
With children starting Infant school while they were still four,the procedures for welcoming and admitting such young children became even more important

This is a small investigation into ways of working with parents pre and post school entry by three schools.
These are located in a small town linked by ribbon development to other small towns and villages in a county in the South East of England. The town is served by rail and motor way links with London and the coast. There is light, local industry, and some small business development. Local employment is in these concerns, shops,and services.A number of people are selfemployed The town is served by 4 Primary schools and and three Infant and Junior linked schools.Accommodation varies from municipal housing which is rented although some is now in private ownership; privately owned housing distributed in small estates around the town and housing for those in temporary accommodation, homeless families, one parent families and others.
The distribution of housing use greatly affects the school populations.

School 1 was built to serve a settled community in the 1960s.It has separate Infant and Junior departments.It catered for both state and private housing.Its catchment has changed drastically over the last few years since the Local Council transferred the housing location for those in temporary accommodation,homeless families etc. to this part of the town. The background varies between wage earning and families on State support.

School 2 is on an older estate of private and municipal housing. It was also built in the 1960s with separate Infant and Junior Departments, but as families have grown up, the numbers attending have declined. The background is mostly wage earning but some families are in receipt of State support.

School 3 is on a private housing estate, built in the 1970s as a Primary School (5 - 11).There is a generous amount of open land for play and recreation. Most children on the estate attend this school. Most parents are in fulltime employment often with both parents working.Some are self-employed. However, some families are also in receipt of State support.

To enrol a child at a local school, parents or care takers have to contact the school and ask for the child's name to be entered for admission. Where no siblings are or have been in attendance, this is the first contact between school and home.
Parental choice is governed by the following criteria (OHP 1)

1. Nearness of access.
2. Reputation of the school - based on local knowledge.
3. Suitability - religious affiliation, special needs etc.
4. The school ethos-does the parent/child like it on first sight.
5. Unknown reasons - extended family contact, special attributes.
6. Sibling attendance.

These are not in order of preference.Any one criterion may influence the reasons for choice.

The purpose of the survey was to compare the practices in the three schools. The following questions were asked of each school.

QUESTIONNAIRE.

1. First contact with parents.

2. Primary areas of parental concern.

3. Arrangements for group/individual interviews.

4. Home visits?

5. Child's introduction to school.

6. 2nd and subsequent contacts.

7. Child's previous experience, preferences, health, areas of discussion with parents

8. Parent/school discussions re management, child care etc.

9. Difficulties encountered with parents.

Other points mentioned included: arrangements for playtime and dinner time; toilets; clothing; methods of control of bullying if it arises; child's skills pre-entry; socialisation skills.

RESULTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE.

School 1

First contact - brief; usually a telephone call or visit to school office. 40 - 50 children admitted to reception class annually.
Arrangements for interview: an appointment is made for a 45 minute interview with headteacher. The child is usually present and this is encouraged. Toys and occupations are available for the child to use. The Early years record part 1 is completed by the Headteacher with parent and child's help.Children's previous experiences,preferences, health etc. are now discussed. The recorded information is open.Parents and child were then shown round the school.

Latterly,parents were shown round in small groups as this process was very time consuming. The interview time was retained.

Home visits were not made.

The majority of parents had very negative feelings about schools. Many did not know what questions to ask, but the first responses were:-

Primary areas of parental concern. (in order):-

1. What about the uniform?
2. Do you teach reading?

Questions depended on whether there was a sibling who attended or who had attended the school.

A group meeting was held at which the school brochure and the business side of school - dinner money, uniform, school fund, PTA etc. was also discussed.
Child management is referred to briefly; points raised are:-
Child's sense of time..." When is Mummy coming?"
Toileting - is the child clean and dry? Hygiene, hand washing.
Dressing skills. School policy on handling aggression.

No parents ask about the curriculum or child's day although this is discussed at the meeting via the Brochure.

During this meeting, children played in the reception classroom while parents met in the school hall.
Children were given a 'Welcome' book prior to entry. (OHP 3)

A post entry parental visit was used by the class teacher to complete the second part of the Early Years Record, while their children played in the classroom.

Difficulties encountered by parents:-

1. Lack of confidence in verbal encounters with teachers.
2. Lack of experience in knowing what questions to ask.
3. Very poor or poor personal experience of school.
4. Pressures on accommodation resulting in stress for parent and child(ren).
5. Professional vocabulary.(Staff need to edit vocabulary to suit audience).
6. Need to overcome antipathy to school and actual fear of crossing the threshold at point of entry.

School 2

First contact - brief; usually a telephone call or visit to school office. 30 - 40 children admitted to reception class annually.
Most communication was verbal.
Arrangements for interview: An appointment for an individual interview was made at which details of the school were given and parent and child were shown round the school.
Parents are now shown round in small groups if possible.

Concerns, if voiced, are:-
1. When can he/she start? (irrespective of child's age within year group)
2. Will it be full or part-time?
3. What about the uniform?

Questions were rarely asked about the curriculum or child's day. Secondary questions concerned diet for vegetarians, Muslim children and children with special dietary needs.

No children's questions were noted.

No home visits were made.

Children visit the school for a series of afternoons before starting school proper. Many children have attended the school's play-group and are, therefore, familiar with the premises.
Children's preferences are noted; e.g. constructional play, painting, group or solo play in the play house etc.

A second meeting was arranged at which general school information was discussed using the School Brochure. Coffee and tea were served and efforts made to make the occasion social and welcoming.
Children could be present at the meeting but usually stayed either in the reception class or in the school play group.

Subsequent contacts:-
Freedom of access to class teacher at arranged times pre and post school. Appointments were preferred for Headteacher contacts but not essential. Further contacts via school Open Days, Meetings on *curricular/health/safety subjects, social events.
Parents are also invited with their child(ren) to school lunch for a 'Taster Day'.This is held just before children start full time school.

The school made good use of the PTA and used the contacts for curricular meetings* and social events.

Difficulties encountered.

Many parents had had no time for their own youth and wanted their children to advance quickly and 'learn'. Few mentioned the child's happiness initially although that was clearly an important consideration in discussion.

School 3. 27-30 children admitted to reception annually.

First contact - telephone/brief visit/letter. This usually includes a request to 'See round the school'.
Arrangements for Interview: an appointment is made for parents with the Headteacher either individually or, as a group in the term before the year of entry.
Group meeting: 30 minutes discussing the Brochure followed by an informal chat, answering questions etc. over coffee in the new entrants classroom with their class teacher.
Children visit the current reception class during the discussion and join their parents in the classroom. No school pupils are in the room during this last half hour.

Home visits are offered. Over the last four years, the following have been tried re home visits.
1. Home visits arranged for all new entrants.
2. Home visits offered to parents on request.

Parents concerns include:
1.When can he/she start?(irrespective of age within year group)
2.When will he/she be able to read?
3.What about the uniform?
Some parents ask about secondary transfer and occasionally, questions are asked about the curriculum for older children.

Subsequent contacts:
In the term before entry, a group meeting is held to discuss and inform re school organisation, the child's day,child's needs etc. Child management is mentioned.Common areas of concern raised by the school are:
Length of day, children's tiredness and its effect on learning and behaviour, personal management re.toileting, dressing and undressing, shoes, coping with large numbers of other children, helpful skills.
Arrangements for school contact are explained in addition to the access to the class teacher before and after school.Parents are encouraged to visit termly to see the class teacher and discuss the child.
A small booklet is available for parents on 'Starting school'. This is very short, 1 sheet only, to encourage parents to read it. (OHP 4)

Child's previous experiences, health etc. are discussed in the personal interviews.

Difficulties encountered.

Insufficient information given on children's background.
Parents were anxious that children should start to 'learn' quickly. Some parents found it difficult to give time to their children and considered material possessions an acceptable substitute.

Conclusions.

1. Most parents found the informal initial contact method acceptable
Mostly choice of school was a result of personal recommendation, sibling attendance and nearness of access. There was a preference for popular schools.

All schools found parents were concerned about their child starting school, although the children themselves seemed relaxed and reasonably confident on entry.

2. Nearly all parents asked the same three questions:

1.When will he/she start?(irrespective of age in year band)
2.What about the uniform?
3.When will he/she learn to read?

In the school with more stable housing and home backgrounds in which most parents had a regular, earned income, a very small group asked about the curriculum. Questions included:
Do you teach music/ instrumental teaching?
What Physical Education lessons are provided and their frequency?
What school visits are made?
No parents asked as to the range of the curriculum or the system of reporting.
In Primary schools (4+ - 11) parents asked about transfer at 11.

In all schools, parents hoped their children would settle down and (by implication) be happy.

3. Parents seemed to prefer the short discussion/information session linked with an informal, social visit.

All schools stressed the importance of building parents'self-confidence;,in good child management by example,in building on parents' knowledge and understanding,in reassuring parents that their child was 'normal'. They also stressed the need for patience in parents and willingness to praise children's efforts. All schools stressed the need for mutual trust and cooperation in the partnership to be built up between school and home.

4. Home visits were not made although these were offered.

5.Introductory visits and familiarity with the building meant most children were reasonably confident on entry. Many found it difficult in the group situation and were very demanding of the adult's attention. Children soon adjusted to the situation and came willingly. Part-time entry was the most helpful mode;children were not so tired and looked forward to the next attendance. This also avoided the stresses of playtime and lunch time in the first weeks of attendance.
The role of the teacher was of paramount importance, initiating and reinforcing parental confidence, skills and interest in their child's education.

6.Subsequent contacts.
Schools welcomed parents, post entry, in a variety of ways. Parents were invited to personal meetings with class teachers;group meetings were held on topics e.g.'Helping your child to read at home', social meetings, curricular workshops, meetings with healthcare personnel,school functions and just 'dropping in'. A popular method was to invite parents to help in school, usually not with their child's class.
Some parents needed persuading/reminding to visit to discuss their child.It is not known if this is through shyness, too busy, or lack of interest;data was not available on this point.
Post entry meetings were used to discuss the importance of play and language and pre-number skills, fine motor skills practice and building the child's confidence and sense of self worth.

Some parents needed persuading/reminding to visit to discuss their child.It is not known if this is through shyness, too busy, or lack of interest;data was not available on this point.

Parents seemed to appreciate an opportunity to discuss their child's health, preferences and other matters with the Headteacher prior to entry.(Early years record).
Meetings regarding child management/care were usually kept to individual interviews when the need arose.

Problems encountered.
Problems occurred when insufficient knowledge of a child's background resulted in lack of understanding of aspects of child behaviour.
Stress in the home - insecurity of tenure or finance, insecure parenting, emotional pressures, overwork, overcrowding, illness, neighbourhood problems all were barriers to good communication with parents.

By encouraging an 'Open Door' policy, the Headteacher and staff tried to build up confidence in the parent, make them welcome and give them freedom to talk with confidentiality to the school, assured. Listening to parents was the most valuable use of time.
Parental evaluation was difficult to obtain.
In general, parents' preferred shorter, social meetings with individual interviews for specifics e.g. entry details, problems.

The whole emphasis was on gaining the child and parent's confidence so that a proactive environment can be achieved.
Creating a welcoming ethos, forming partnerships, working together for mutual support and benefit for the good of the child.

Other survey results. Sample:30 schools:8 Inf. 21 JMI 1 N.

A survey of provision for 4 year olds in a county in SE England in 1990 revealed similar concerns regarding the time needed for pre school contact where no non-contact time was available.
Information for parents was widely available, but information suitable for children, less so.

Pre- school provision OHP -
8% of schools offered a personal booklet for the child.

16% offered a toy or games library for pre- school children.

All schools offered pre-school visits, the average being 5 afternoons prior to entry.

26%of schools offered home visits prior to entry. 6% offered home visits where there was a particular need.
3% visited post school entry.

Lack of time for home visits concerned certain schools;others considered such visits as a possible intrusion into domestic privacy.

All these activities involved parents in school/teacher contact.

CONCLUSION.

Parents appeared to have good opportunities for visiting school., for acquiring information in a welcoming environment.
Children were encouraged to visit pre-school.
Much thought was expended on providing useful and friendly induction meetings for parents. Methods and format were constantly updated to cater for new requirements.
It was widely recognised by the schools that parental cooperation, understanding and interest was essential if a satisfactory transition from home to school was to be made.

COMMENTS

Time would appear to be a crucial factor in promoting good parent/school relationships. Schools where the staffing was generous, or where classroom assistants were employed could sometimes free teachers for parent contact work.
The benefits of this for both parties are great.
Many parents found the short, individually titled booklets convenient to read. Although no questions were asked on the use of school brochures, clearly, some parents found their length rather daunting. Similarly, the numbers of forms for completion have increased. Some parents found written communication difficult; ways need to be explored to find this out early so that communications can be given in a different form e.g. verbally.
The survey prompted re-examination of ways of working with and communicating with parents. More inter-school discussions on successful interventions are planned as a result.

OFF TO A GOOD START.

A way of working with parents pre and post school entry.

Synopsis of paper.

The paper will look at ways in which three schools deal with issues arising from parental involvement pre and post school entry. The area is that of small towns linked by ribbon development in the SE of England.The first school visit is often the parents' only contact with school since they completed their secondary education. Importance of a welcoming environment- parents seen as valued partners in their child's education. The symbiosis of home and school.
Initial contact by letter, telephone, home visit. etc. links start to be established . This contact must be welcoming.
Introduction of school philosophy, the first curriculum, outline of child's day, basic routine, possible problems, support services, parent teacher contact. Suggestions for preparing your child for school to facilitate a confident and happy transition from home to school. Stressing and building of parental ability as the first educators - their work in whole child development; building confidence, increasing knowledge and understanding of child development, differences and similarities on growth and behaviour patterns.
Business matters, background details, health, contacts, parents' rights, keeping parents informed.
Follow up meetings often very informal.
Future meetings concerned with building confidence in child management, the importance of play, skills practice, language and numeracy development. Evaluation of preparatory work with class teacher, planning future strategies, Parental evaluation.